



## Political Crisis in Moldova at the Beginning of President Sandu's Term

Jakub Pieńkowski

The political crisis in Moldova is dragging on. It was triggered by the pro-Russian Party of Socialists (PSRM) to make it more difficult for pro-European President Maia Sandu, sworn in in December 2020, to exercise power. Her demands to fight corruption confront the interests of the Socialists' leader and former president, Igor Dodon. On his way out, PSRM voted in a package of obstructive bills and the Ion Chicu cabinet resigned. This was to deepen the state crisis and force a demonstration of ineptitude on Sandu's part, which PSRM hopes translates into victory over her Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) in possible early parliamentary elections.

Direct elections gave President Sandu a strong public mandate. But without a parliamentary majority she has little influence on government policy and her veto can be rejected by a simple majority of the chamber. The parties opposed to Sandu currently dominate the 101-seat parliament. Her PAS has only 15 MPs and [its former coalition partner](#), the pro-European Dignity and Truth Platform, has 11. The strongest, PSRM, has 37 seats. Functioning as a minority government, it was informally supported by 15 deputies of the "For Moldova" group, created by the Șor Party and independent MPs who had left the Democratic Party. Due to fears of planned reforms by Sandu, Dodon cooperates with exile patrons of the bloc [Ilan Șor and Vlad Plahotniuc](#), with whom officially he is in conflict.

**PSRM's Scorched Earth Tactic.** [The loss by Dodon, who was seeking re-election, to Sandu](#) surprised the Socialists. Therefore, before she was sworn in, together with the "For Moldova" bloc, they passed a package of bills to deprive of the presidency of its competences and complicate the socio-economic situation in Moldova. The parliament took over from the president control of the Information and Security Service, the main instrument of influence on the security of the state and on the fight against corruption, the latter Sandu's keystone promise. PAS appealed against an amendment to the Constitutional Court to stop publication of the change, but Dodon, in his last days in office, promulgated it.

The pro-Russian and anti-European electorate, which is hostile to Sandu, is motivated by the cancelling of a bill banning in Moldova the retransmission of propagandistic programmes from Russian media. PSRM also is provoking ethnic tensions and approximates the Russian-speaking electorate with slogans of defence against [Romanisation and unionism](#). That is why it voted a bill to grant Russian the status of "the language of inter-ethnic communication" and to make it equal to the official Romanian. It provided for service in institutions and issuing documents in Russian throughout the country although, apart from Transnistria, the language is the primary one for only about 14% of citizens (mainly Ukrainians, Russians, Gagauz people, and Bulgarians). PSRM's aim was to force a possible pro-EU government and Sandu to repeal this bill, which would have caused public protests and retaliation from Russia itself. However, on 21 January, just before it came into force, the Constitutional Court declared it unconstitutional.

To further divide the electorate against Sandu and PAS, PSRM has tried to deepen the economic collapse and deprive the country of Western financial support. The budget for 2021 shows a deficit of over 25%—€667 million. Two-thirds of this amount is to be covered by assistance from the EU, the World Bank, and especially the IMF, which in return expects reform of the public finances. PSRM, in attempting to win over voters, increased the budget deficit by generously distributing social welfare and cutting the

retirement age from 63 to 62 for men and to 57 for women. To block the IMF assistance, PSRM repealed the law on the recapitalisation of the National Bank of Moldova, which had been called in to preserve system liquidity after about a billion dollars was stolen from the banking sector in 2014.

**PSRM's Fake Concession.** The Socialists argue that the resignation of the Chicu government on 23 December 2020, on the eve of Sandu's swearing-in, was her demand. In fact, the intent was to shift the responsibility for the paralysed government to the new president. This is demonstrated by the illegitimate refusal of Chicu and the ministers of health, economy, and finance—key during a pandemic—to perform their duties until the new government is formed. Finally, on 31 December, Sandu appointed Aureliu Ciocoi, the minister of foreign affairs, as the interim prime minister and entrusted the ministries to secretaries of state.

It is impossible to build a stable government majority in the current parliament, but the constitution does not provide dissolution of the chamber. This was confirmed by the Constitutional Court, which negatively responded to a PAS inquiry about the possibility of adopting such a resolution. The constitution enables the president to dissolve the parliament after a three-month legislative paralysis, which would be counted from the February session, meaning that elections would be held no earlier than late spring.

The shorter path to dissolution of the parliament is to fail twice a vote of confidence in the new government within 45 days. Although the Socialists declare their support for early elections, given their aim to deepen the state crisis and provoke disappointment among Sandu's electorate, they are seeking to establish a dysfunctional government. They hope that the candidate—clearly proposed by Sandu for immediate rejection—will be collectively supported by MPs who have no chance of re-election. This speculation is more probable given a Vox Populi poll from January that found that, apart from PAS (34%) and PSRM (33%), only the Șor Party (13%) and the anti-system Our Party (8%) of [Renato Usatîi, the mayor of Bălți](#), would enter the parliament. On 27 January, the president appointed as prime minister Natalia Gavriliță, the minister of finance in the Sandu government in 2019. The president hopes that the candidate's anti-corruption views will discourage the chamber from opportunistically voting in favour of her candidacy and, if accepted, will quickly lead to a vote of no confidence in her cabinet.

**International Activity.** President Sandu, despite the lack of government support, can create her own foreign policy. Already at the beginning of her term in office, she broke through the diplomatic ostracism of both Moldova's neighbours—[Romania](#) and [Ukraine](#)—as well [as the EU](#), ongoing since Dodon's presidency. On 29 December, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis visited Chișinău. He announced the strengthening of the strategic partnership and comprehensive assistance to Moldova, including

medical equipment and 200,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses and support for the development of a vaccination plan, neglected by PSRM. On 12 January, Sandu paid her first foreign visit to Kyiv where, with President Volodymyr Zelensky, she signed memoranda calling for a strategic partnership and infrastructure projects. On 17–18 January, she was in Brussels appealing for EU support for reform of the judiciary and the fight against corruption in Moldova.

In the face of possible new elections, Dodon has sought the support of Russia, despite the fact that as president he disappointed it with [too little attention to its interests](#). That is why, after the swearing-in of Sandu, together with a PSRM delegation, he travelled to Moscow to meet with Dmitry Kozak, the deputy head of administration of the Russian president and plenipotentiary for cooperation with Moldova. The election of Dodon as chairman of PSRM at the end of December proves that he obtained the Russians' support. He proved his loyalty to Russia in January when, after another visit to Moscow, he accused Sandu of allegedly secret negotiations with Ukraine that would threaten Moldova's security.

**Conclusions.** The lack of support from parliament prevents the reforms announced by Sandu. The chamber is dominated by groups hostile to her and unable to form a stable government. The strongest of the parties, PSRM, pushed through bills that have made it difficult for the president to exercise power and also exposed Moldova to social conflicts and hindered cooperation with foreign partners, especially the IMF.

Sandu, fighting the resistance of the majority of parliament, aims to dissolve it, hoping that new elections will allow the formation of a pro-presidential coalition. However, the constitutional procedures are lengthy and could backfire. It is probable that her candidate for prime minister, nominated only as a formality, will receive a vote of confidence instead of being rejected as hoped, backed by the Socialists and MPs afraid of losing their seat after the dissolution of the chamber. The creation of such an unstable cabinet would favour PSRM, which hopes to return to power after the president and the PAS are compromised in the eyes of voters.

The support of the EU Member States for Sandu is in Poland's interest as she gives hope for pro-European reforms in Moldova. Romania and countries favourable to the Eastern Partnership can be valuable allies in this effort. A strong signal from Poland would be proposals for visits by the respective presidents, who last met bilaterally in 2014. In turn, in the event of the establishment of a government in Moldova wanting democratisation of the country, Poland, apart from bilateral cooperation, could also consider multilateral actions with Romania and Ukraine, for example, in the field of the fight against corruption. The purposefulness of the Polish diplomatic activity was proved by Sandu's declaration of willingness to build a "circle of trust" together with Romania and Ukraine.